

Reaping what you sow: reflections on the Western Cape farm workers strike

Shawn Hattingh

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The series of strikes and protests that recently took place in and around farms in South Africa's Western Cape Province was fuelled by the deep-seated anger and frustration that workers feel. On a daily basis, farm workers face not only appalling wages, bad living conditions and precarious work, but also widespread racism, intimidation and humiliation. The extent of the oppressive conditions run deep and it is not uncommon for workers to even be beaten by farm-owners and managers for perceived 'transgressions'. Indeed, life for workers in the rural areas has always been harsh, but over the last two decades it has in many ways gotten even worse and poverty has in many cases grown.

In fact, since 1994 farm-owning capitalists have been on the attack. Approximately 2 million farm dwellers and workers have been evicted from farms since then in South Africa¹. Many of these people have been forced into townships in the rural areas, where they have become either unemployed or casual or seasonal workers on farms. Services in these townships are also of an appalling standard with most people living in shacks or dilapidated Reconstruction and Development houses. Coupled to this, there has been a proliferation of labour brokers exploiting people's desperate need for work, and piecework has been re-introduced on many farms. Farm owners obviously benefit from this situation: many no longer have to provide accommodation for workers, and hiring people on a casual basis or based on piecework keeps wage bills low. Thus, whether workers are seasonal, casual or permanent, life in South Africa's rural areas is defined by exploitation and extreme oppression. It is no exaggeration to say that farm workers, who are mostly black, are viewed and treated as sub-humans by farm owners, managers and labour brokers. It is in this context that farm workers in the Western Cape rose up for the first time in decades. For once this saw farm owners and managers really reaping what they had sown

This article examines, from an anarchist-communist perspective, the issues surrounding the farm workers strike including the workers' actions and demands, and the responses of the state and bosses to this. It, however, also looks at the role that some union officials and local politicians played, and how this impacted upon the strikes, including the sometimes contradictory role of officials from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Finally, suggestions around how the struggle of farm workers can be taken forward in the aftermath of the strikes are made with a focus of building struggles and movements under the control of workers.

Background

The strikes and accompanying protest action in the Western Cape's rural areas initially began on the 27th of August 2012 when workers on farms surrounding De Doorns downed tools. Poor pay, bad living conditions and unfair labour practices were their main grievances. Protests soon erupted in Stofland (Dustland), the township outside of De Doorns where most of these workers live in abject poverty. As part of this, running battles erupted between strikers and the police and people barricaded the national highway and railway that runs past the township. The appalling conditions on other farms and rural townships in the Western Cape soon meant that hundreds of thousands of workers across the province soon joined the strike. This saw protests spread to almost every rural town in the south Western Cape.

By early November a number of strike committees had been established by mainly, but not exclusively, casual and seasonal workers in many of these areas. It was clear at this point that the

¹ www.pmg.org.za-

farm workers strike had been largely self-organised and had initially taken place largely outside of trade unions and political parties. In fact, trade unions in the farming sector are relatively small, with as little as 3% of farm workers in the Western Cape belonging to a union².

Along with the initial formation of strike committees, a demand also emerged from workers that the minimum wage for farm workers should be increased from R 69 a day to R 150 a day. Added to this, workers also demanded paid maternity leave, an end to labour brokers, an end to piece work, rent free housing, a moratorium on evictions, and an end to police brutality in the rural areas³. In the early stages of the strike, the police were overstretched, and both the state and farmers were firmly on the back foot. At this point, the real prospect existed that the workers could win substantial gains through the strike as it was gaining momentum and spreading.

During the initial phase of the strike wave, local politicians and prominent trade union officials also waded into the battle. With the entrance of these players into the strike, the situation became far more messy with political agendas playing themselves out and personalities often attempting to jostle for the limelight to increase their and their organisations' profiles. As part of this, the strike was suspended undemocratically several times by certain union officials, the first being in November: the very point when the strike was gaining momentum (how and why it was suspended will be looked at below). Yet despite repeated suspensions the strike repeatedly flared-up. Indeed, in January 2013 the strike recommenced, which saw protests once again erupt across rural towns in the Western Cape and battles once again rage between the police and protestors. What has become clear, therefore, is that despite the strike being suspended several times, and recently called off by Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in late January, workers are going to continue to fight. In fact, plans are underway by farm workers to march on Parliament in the next few weeks.

The messy entry of BAWUSA and COSATU officials into the strike

While the strike was initially self-organised outside of the unions, officials from the BAWSI Agricultural Workers Union of South Africa (BAWUSA) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) – along with its affiliate the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) – soon entered the arena, particularly in De Doorns. Their entry gradually saw a shift of power away from the workers' themselves and the strike committees that had been formed. In terms of this, the officials from these unions started to become the public 'face' of the strike, and at times they were able influence the strike in profound and often unhealthy ways. In fact, their actions were not always to the benefit of workers in practice.

The reason why BAWUSA officials were able to enter the strike is that although the union is small, it has had a presence amongst some farm workers in De Doorns for a number of years and its general-secretary, Nosey Pieterse, has helped farm workers with eviction cases in the past. Through these connections BAWUSA officials soon gained a foothold in the strike in De Doorns. In fact, Pieterse along with the COSATU regional secretary, Tony Ehrenreich, were also soon singled out by the media as the unofficial spokespersons of the strike because of their already existing public profiles. Both of them, therefore, played a prominent role in the strikes; and came to largely overshadow the initial strike committees that had been formed by workers.

² www.hrw.org

³ Xali, M. Western Cape farm workers courageous struggle. Workers' World News. February 2012

Although BAWUSA is a trade union and supported the strike, it was established by aspiring black capitalists within the wine industry through an organisation called the Black Association of the Wine and Spirit Industry (BAWSI), which it is still linked to. The aim of BAWSI and BAWUSA, therefore, has been to ultimately push for greater black involvement in the wine industry across class lines. It is clear that BAWSI and BAWUSA officials saw the strike as an opportunity to grow the profile of these organisations and its officials, like Nosey Pieterse, soon manoeuvred into prominence. BAWUSA's agenda during the strikes, however, was to negotiate a settlement with the state and farm owners through dialogue. While it led demonstrations in De Doorns on a number of occasions, these often seemed to be a secondary tactic with the primary objective being to enter into negotiations that included unions, the state and farm-owners (with the strike committees having no direct representation in the negotiations). The cross-class nature of BAWUSA was also evident in terms of Pieterse himself. Pieterse is an emerging capitalist farmer, and through BAWSI he has an interest in one of the largest wine companies in the Western Cape, KWV. Due to its cross-class make-up, the commitment that BAWSI/BAWUSA officials have in building a struggle based on worker control and direct democracy is probably questionable, despite their support for the strike⁴.

COSATU officials from the start also supported the strike, and through FAWU it had some presence in De Doorns. COSATU officials viewed the strike as a way of finally making inroads in terms of union membership on the farms. COSATU from the start, however, made it explicit that it did not want a similar situation as had occurred on the platinum mines, where workers took action outside of the unions and set up their own independent structures. COSATU made this explicit when it stated: "The unions are trying to avoid a Marikana situation where workers act without guidance from unions, and resolutions are not found in negotiations"⁵. Thus, COSATU wanted to gain leadership over the strikes and its agenda was to push for a negotiated settlement along with driving the strikes into the confines of the existing labour legislation framework. Indeed, Ehrenreich himself added: "When workers take their own action without direction and guidance, that is when the danger comes about...they don't understand the parameters of the law and all the other stuff"⁶. Hence, COSATU's interest was not to build a struggle based on direct democracy and militancy. So although it supported the strike, it pushed for dialogue between unions, the state and the farmers' organisation – in the form of AgriSA – to resolve the strike. In the process though, the workers and their strike committees were excluded from the negotiations.

The fact that Tony Ehrenreich is also a well-known ANC politician (in legislative opposition at a provincial level in the Western Cape) with a high media profile, gave him a major influence in the strike – despite most farm workers having no affiliation to COSATU or its ally, the ANC. COSATU and Ehrenreich used this profile to, on a number of occasions, suspend the strike and ultimately call it off, without consulting or getting mandates from workers themselves. In fact, COSATU officials unilaterally called for the suspension of the strike when they deemed it useful or necessary. Perhaps the most important occasion was in November 2012 when the strike was spreading and gaining momentum. At that point, COSATU suspended the strike unilaterally, in order to try and negotiate a settlement with farm owners and to allow time for the state to supposedly intervene to legally raise the minimum wage.

⁴ www.iol.co.za

⁵ mg.co.za

⁶ mg.co.za

Thus, both BAWUSA and COSATU wanted to negotiate a settlement through dialogue, and suspended the strike unilaterally on a number of occasions to follow this path. Yet, this strategy largely ended in failure and excluded the workers themselves – they were supposedly ‘represented’ by the unions, but not directly. The limitations of dialogue by union officials were perhaps best highlighted by the fact that the state point blank refused to raise the minimum wage – a demand of both COSATU and BAWUSA at the negotiating table – until it is up for review in February 2013. Likewise, AgriSA refused to reach any national or regional settlement that would see an increase in the minimum wage. Where there were gains, for instance where some farmers offered higher wages, these could mainly be attributed to the pressure farmers felt from the strikes and protests; and not the negotiating skills of union officials. When the state finally announced in February that the minimum wage for farm workers would be raised to R 105, this was also mainly due to pressure the strike created, and not due to slick dialogue by union officials. The problem, too, was that each time the strike was undemocratically suspended by union officials it was difficult, but not impossible for workers to regain the momentum.

The fact that COSATU could, however, unilaterally suspend the strike on a number of occasions – to follow a path of what amounted to social dialogue – also reveals much about the strength of the fledgling strike committees. Although they initially played a major role in starting the strike in a number of areas, the strike committees simply did not have the strength to counter COSATU’s calls to suspend the strike, and workers gradually drifted back to work when the calls were made. A strike coalition was also established during the strike by unions and progressive non-governmental organisations to build and bring strike committees together so that workers could control the strike. Some of the unions and organisations in the coalition, like the Commercial Stevedore Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU) and the Surplus People’s Project (SPP) have a long history of attempting to build workers’ committees and forums in the rural areas. However, while the coalition did bring some strike committees on board, and helped strengthen some on the ground, many areas remained without any such committees, and the coalition did not effectively become a platform controlled by workers themselves to coordinate the strike (despite the coalition’s intention to facilitate this). This meant there was no strongly organised and effective counter-weight to the COSATU and BAWUSA officials and their agenda. Indeed, COSATU – despite participating in the coalition – largely ignored the resolutions and the mandates that did emerge out of it. Rather COSATU unilaterally followed the path that its leadership thought was appropriate, and in effect sidelined other organisations including in many cases the strike committees and other organisations in the coalition.

Perhaps also playing into this situation, was the fact that farm workers do not have a long history of organising or undertaking major struggles, unlike mineworkers, in South Africa. When a major organisation, in the form of COSATU, suspended the strike, most workers went along with it. Certainly many workers were confused by these calls to stop and start the strike and many felt disgruntled with it. Yet they did not effectively mount a challenge to it. This could be due to a lack of a history of sustained struggle, limited experience with workers’ direct democracy and the confidence that these bring.

The reaction of the state and bosses to the series of strikes

While the state and bosses were involved in on-and-off negotiations with COSATU and BAWUSA officials, they used the numerous suspensions of the strike that accompanied this to go on the offensive. Across the Western Cape, and in the aftermath of the first suspension of the strike, thousands of farm workers were fired or suspended. Many more had disciplinary actions taken against them. When the strikes recommenced, some farm owners even locked workers in on the farms, preventing them from striking. Added to this, some farm owners hired private security to intimidate workers. In one instance in Robertson, a farmer drove around with a shotgun threatening to shoot CSAAWU workers that were out on strike. As part of their propaganda offensive, many farm owners threatened to also mechanise in the future and lay-off workers. Some of the registered unions, such as CSAAWU, also now face legal battles in the aftermath of the strike and some farm-owners are threatening to use these unions' legal status to sue them for damages. The state too used the suspensions of the strike to repeatedly strengthen its forces. While it was initially overstretched during November 2012, when it was unable to cope with all of the protest actions, it used the first suspension of the strike to re-enforce police units in the area and deploy a Tactical Response Team (TRT) to undermine the strike and end the protests.

Many of the police units seem to have relished the task of attempting to end the protests surrounding the farm workers' strike. At least 3 strikers were killed at the hands of the police. Tear gas, stun-grenades and rubber bullets were also fired at strikers in almost every rural town in the Western Cape. On one occasion during the strikes in Wolsely, the police started using live ammunition when they ran out of rubber bullets. Townships where farm workers live were also raided at night, and a number of people were threatened and beaten up in their houses by the police. During one incident workers that had been arrested also reported that police fired tear gas canisters into the police vans in which they were being held. The National Prosecuting Authority also instructed state prosecutors to oppose bail for workers and activists that were arrested during the latter stages of the strikes and protest actions.

Of course, the role of the police and the state in general during the strikes was to protect private property and the welfare of the capitalist farmers. So despite the fact that a number of local ANC councillors at times supported the strike, due to the dynamics of local oppositional politics, the ANC-headed state in practice backed the farmers. Thus, although there has sometimes been tensions in South Africa between sections of the ruling class in the form of top officials in the state (who are mainly black) and capitalist farmers (who are mainly white), the state has played a massive role in protecting farmers against the strikers. While there may, therefore, be internal squabbling in the ruling class, they have united when faced with workers rising up, and they have used the state, amongst other things, to try and crush the strikers. As Bakunin pointed out this is what the state is designed to do when he said "*the state is authority, domination, and force, organised by the property-owning and so-called enlighten classes against the masses*"⁷ and its role is to protect and maintain by force the privileges of the ruling class. It is, therefore, not a neutral entity or negotiating partner that will simply intervene to help farm workers, as COSATU and BAWUSA officials hoped, but rather an enemy of the strikers. Indeed, its forces will gun down workers if necessary to protect the interests of the capitalist farmers; as they did at Marikana to

⁷ Bakunin, M. 1992. *The Basic Bakunin: Writings 1869–1871*. AK Press, p.140

protect the interests of mine bosses. As such, the state has to be forced from the outside by the workers through struggle to meet their demands and not through a reliance on social dialogue.

Forward to workers' power

Despite the internal and external challenges, the farm workers' strike was both historical and in many cases heroic. One of the poorest sections of society finally rose up to fight for justice and better wages. While the strike has been called off for now, it is also clear farm workers are going to embark on strikes and protests in the near future – many still want R 150 and their other demands met. So while the battle is over for now, the war is still being fought.

The strike also was successful in highlighting the appalling conditions facing the poor in the rural areas, and it has probably changed the outlook of farm workers forever. As such, the strikes that have taken place on the farms and rural towns offer a great opportunity to begin to build a militant workers' movement in the rural areas. Certainly, there is a massive need for militant worker-controlled structures and radical directly democratic unions on the farms and in the rural towns that can fight for not only reforms, but eventually revolution.

Perhaps the task for now is for worker activists, activists and organisations that are for workers' power and control to put their energy into contributing to building and maintaining the worker and strike committees that have emerged and to put energy into expanding them into new areas. This too includes building the coalition into a structure controlled by workers. It is important too that a culture of direct democracy be consolidated amongst activists on the farms and in the rural townships as part of this. Certainly, if the strike and workers' committees that have emerged are expanded and consolidated, this could enable workers to take the struggle forward in the future and direct it themselves. A start has been made during the recent strikes and this should be built on. Even if the current strike does not resume, future battles lie ahead and it is important that worker-controlled directly democratic structures are there to take this forward. Hence, the battle must also be seen as a long-term one.

In the aftermath of the strikes there is also an opportunity for militant unions, like CSAAWU, to grow and bring more workers into the union. The problem faced by such unions in the past is that it has been hard to recruit on the farms due to intimidation and being denied access to the farms. The climate in the aftermath of the strikes may have changed this. Unions such as CSAAWU could also use the strategy of recruiting workers and community members in the townships first, where the major battles during the strikes were centred around, and then use this as a spring board to recruit amongst workers that live on the farms. As battles go forward, strong and militant, worker-controlled unions will be vital.

It is also important that within the committees a revolutionary counter-culture, based on working class pride, be built going forward. This could help sustain people in struggle and counter any opportunists that may wish to use the movement for their own ends. Coupled to this, radical popular revolutionary education needs to be built.

What is also important is that in trying to build a worker-controlled movement, the likes of the BAWUSA and COSATU officials would have to be engaged in a political battle. Their ideology of attempting to work with the state, as if it were an ally or neutral entity, would have to be effectively countered, along with their practices of undermining direct democracy. This is vital for when new strikes and protests erupt. Hopefully, workers have also drawn their own conclusions

about the necessity of struggles remaining under their control and not under that of high profile individuals. An opportunity has been opened by the strikes, and it should not be left for the COSATU and BAWUSA officials to fill, but rather it must be filled by workers' power.

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